

# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by  
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APRIL 8TH, 1942

DEAR MEMBER,

One of our members serving with the Forces writes that since the war began he has been listening for some clear, outspoken declaration by the Churches about right and wrong in relation to the war, whether the wrong is committed by the enemy or ourselves, and has failed to hear it. He sends me an article by John Gordon in the *Sunday Express*, in which he finds the kind of thing for which he has been looking, and regrets that it should be left to secular writers to wield the thunders of the Church. Here is the stuff, or part of it :—

“The decay of this nation began when we lost the moral courage to stand up against indisputable wickedness. When we decided that we weren’t our brother’s keeper any longer. That no matter what torment and torture was inflicted on other peoples, it didn’t matter to us so long as it did not affect our own comfort or our pockets.

“For years we watched Japan ravage China, Italy ravage Abyssinia, Germany and Italy together ravage the people of Spain in their dress rehearsal for the world war. But we never had the courage to stand up for right against wrong. We watched the pogroms in Germany, and the establishment of the torture camps. We could have stopped them too. But we didn’t think it was our business. Yet it was our business. The preservation of right and the ruthless stamping out of wrong is our business, and every man’s business, wherever it happens in the world. But it takes moral courage and effort to stand up for the right things. And we did not want to be distracted from the fun and money-making which we had made the business of life.

“Even within our own shores we tolerated gross wickedness and abuses. Unemployment and starvation, sparing not even innocent children. Do you remember the distressed areas which it took the war to wipe out? God didn’t make these horror spots. We would not face stark facts and say, ‘These things are wrong and we shall not tolerate them. Only those things that are right shall endure.’

“Don’t worry looking for leaders, but make yourself a leader. Say to yourself: ‘From this moment in my dealings with others in the business of life and in the business of the nation, I do no wrong. I tolerate no wrong. And I will fight with all the power in me for those things I know to be right.’”

That is good straight talking. It demands action which, even if it were that of only a small, determined minority, would bring about a big change in the moral situation.

But elsewhere in this same sermon I come across this passage, which suggests that our secular preachers are not less confused and confusing in their guidance than the Church is said to be.

“One thing Japan has certainly done for us. She has taught us to hate, to hate implacably and furiously. We scream for vengeance. Now, I am all for vengeance. And in a war against enemies such as we are fighting now I would have no particular scruples as to how I exacted it. The only thing I would make certain of is that I did exact it. I hope to live to see the day when the sacred carcass of the Mikado will be dragged out of his palace and bayoneted at the door by British soldiers as his soldiers bayoneted our people. I would like to see him and all his responsible generals and politicians dealt with on the ‘eye for an eye and tooth for tooth’ principle. For I think there are times when for the greater good of humanity we should put aside our squeamishness and civilized rules for a moment and deal out retribution with ruthless horror as a deterrent and an example.”



I rub my eyes. The sole way to make the world better, we were told, is that we do no wrong, tolerate no wrong; that we fight with all the power in us for the things we know to be right. But now we are bidden to get rid of our scruples and lay aside our squeamishness and put civilized rules behind us. We are to hand over the initiative to the enemy whose crimes we denounce. Instead of doing what we believe to be right, we are to adopt his standards.

The Bible holds no truck with these confusions. It declares a universal right, an impartial judgment. Inhumanities are not one whit less damnable when they are committed by Englishmen than when they are committed by Germans or Japanese. "Reckonest thou this, O man, who judgest them that practise such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?"

## BREAK THE ENTAIL

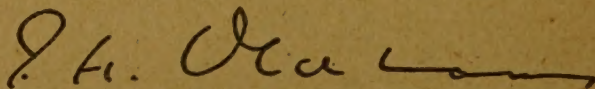
If we reflect on the consequences of unbridled vengeance, we see how true and profound is the Christian understanding of sin as a kingdom of evil, with a frightful power of self-perpetuation and self-propagation. The real problem is how to prevent evil from spreading like bindweed. The advice given in this article is to transplant it from our neighbour's garden into our own. It is likely enough to spread there, but to encourage it is folly, since it can only destroy the flowers and fruit we want to grow.

It is not a question whether there should be just retribution for evil deeds; there must be. The real question is whether we have the moral stamina to lift the world to a new level by an austere devotion to justice, an iron discipline which forbids the indulgence of the primitive passion of revenge. That would offer hope that mankind need not for ever be the prey of passion. The way of revenge will only plunge us deeper into a world of multiplying hates.

The determination to keep retribution to the strait and difficult path of justice is the first step in the pursuit of higher, remedial purposes. The only way of escape from the unending chain of wrong engendering wrong is, as I wrote a year ago, to *break the entail*. The one hope for humanity is that there should arise lovers of mankind who have the creative force and courage to introduce a new principle; who for the love of God and for the sake of their fellow-men are resolved, in the kindling phrases of St. Paul, to lay aside the works of darkness and to live as the sons of light and of the day.

This week's Supplement is by a writer for whose trustworthiness and knowledge I can fully vouch.

Yours sincerely,



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APRIL 8TH, 1942



## A CHURCH UNDER NAZI OCCUPATION

The situation of the Dutch Reformed Church in the period preceding the war was far from healthy. Owing to the continued strife of the various theological parties in its midst and to the impotence of its Synod it had become a Church without spiritual leadership and without a voice. Many attempts to re-organize and re-vitalize the Church—the last one just before the war—had ended in failure. Good work was done by individual pastors, but the Church as such seemed condemned to remain a bureaucratic organization, precariously holding together a great variety of unrelated groups and persons without a clear common message or purpose. As a result of this its influence in the country was decreasing. The vital religious forces took shape outside the Church in many different movements and enterprises. If ever a Church needed a great shock to be awakened, it was this Church.

### THE SHOCK OF WAR

That shock came in May, 1940, in a terrible way. Holland had *known* about the possibility of invasion. The Dutch Church had known about the Church conflict in Germany. But what a difference there proved to be between an object of knowledge and the reality itself! For weeks the Church and the country as a whole were in a state of semi-consciousness. Could it be true that Rotterdam was a pile of smoking ruins, that the Queen had left, that Holland was no longer Holland? In those days the Church spoke, but it spoke in tones of one who is not fully master of his own voice. Its message was a prayer for light and guidance.

There followed weeks of great uncertainty. What attitude should be taken to the German authorities? The invader himself seemed to make things as easy as possible. The new Governor-General declared solemnly that the peculiar genius of Holland would be respected. There was much talk of reconstruction and of beginning all over again. Some of the most trusted Christian leaders seemed to be in-

clined to make the best of a bad situation and to "collaborate" with the invaders.

### THE COURAGE OF INDIVIDUALS

But soon there began to sound in this atmosphere of uncertainty some clear voices. It is remarkable that these first strong warnings and calls to spiritual resistance came from Christians. Dr. Eijkman of Amsterdam issued a brochure of which many thousands of copies were distributed before it was forbidden. He called upon the country not to let itself be misled by the new slogans. In the midst of all the talk about a new order and reconstruction Christians are to remember that there is only one foundation, namely Jesus Christ, the crucified. In an hour of crisis a nation does not start with new experiments, but returns to the abiding principles of its life. These principles are for Holland embodied in its history of the sixteenth century, when the Bible was given to the people and William the Silent formed the nation. To deny that foundation and heritage is not reconstruction but treason.

That the writer of this brochure as well as many other leaders of the nation, professors, doctors and statesmen, were arrested and sent to a concentration camp in Germany made it clear to many that the great struggle for the soul of the nation had now begun. In September, 1940, further proof was given as to the manner in which the particular genius of Holland was to be respected. At that time a beginning was made with the introduction of the anti-Jewish legislation. On this point also the first clear reaction came from individual Christians. Mr. N. H. de Graaf, a high official in the Ministry of Social Affairs, called his collaborators together and announced that he had offered his resignation because of the introduction of the "Aryan paragraph." He explained that for him this was a matter of conscience, since "the preference of one human being to another on the grounds of race is in conflict with the fundamentals of faith in Jesus Christ. To reject the Jews is



to reject Jesus Christ." Mr. de Graaf was also sent to a concentration camp.

## ACTION BY THE CHURCH

In October, 1940, the Church gave its first clear witness. The significance of the declaration which was read in the services on October 27th is that it was not a vague and non-committal message, but an attempt to take a Christian stand in the face of the spiritual dangers threatening the life of the country. The declaration spoke especially of the need of maintaining spiritual liberty at all costs, and of the right and duty of the Church to give a Christian education to its youth. The language of this declaration was not as definite as many would have wished, but it proved at least that the Church had begun to understand that its whole future depended on its willingness to become a confessing Church.

On the same day another short communication was read, which announced that the several Reformed Churches had together sent a letter to the Commissioner of the Reich in which these Churches protested, on the basis of the Scriptures and on grounds of Christian mercy, against the introduction of anti-Semitic legislation. Some regretted that that letter itself was not read in the Churches, but there was a deep gratitude that the Church had spoken out on the grave Jewish issue. Was it not the first time that a Church under the rule of National-Socialism had raised its voice publicly against the persecution of the Jews? That the old, immovable Dutch Reformed Church should speak out thus courageously seemed almost unbelievable.

## THE JEWISH ISSUE

In the year 1941, the Jewish issue remained in the forefront. It was generally recognized in Christian circles that this was the test case for the fidelity of the Church, and that if the Church were to lose this first spiritual battle it would lose the following battles also. The Jewish question is to-day not only a social and moral question, but a religious issue of the first magnitude. As a leading Dutch theologian had shown before the war, anti-Semitism is essentially a revolt of the *Edda*, the Germanic pagan myth, against the *Thora*, the revelation of the God of the Old and the New Testament. That is why in preaching and writing leaders of the Church have continued to state positively what the Bible teaches concerning the destiny of the Jews, and to

show how this teaching is absolutely incompatible with anti-Semitism and persecution of the Jewish race. Among the many pamphlets which have appeared on the subject the most widely read is certainly that of Dr. Kraemer on Romans ix-xi. The Church Synod has borne further witness on this subject in its approach to the authorities in March, 1941, and especially in its Pastoral Letter of September, 1941. That this witness finds wide response in the country is shown by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Christian schools have refused to apply the decree which requires the removal of Jewish children from non-Jewish schools, and that the Student Christian Movement has dissolved itself rather than allow its members of Jewish origin to be ousted from its midst.

## THE AWAKENING OF NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

It is not astonishing that the events of 1940 and 1941 have awakened a very strong national consciousness among practically all classes of the country. Living in close contact with three of the main national cultures of Europe, the Dutch had become an internationalized nation which did not show much appreciation of its own traditions. But now that they see their national heritage threatened they are re-discovering its real value. There is a new appreciation of the period of "the rise of the Dutch Republic," and especially of its "father," William the Silent, a new understanding of the precious tradition of liberty and democracy, a deeper sense of attachment to the House of Orange, which finds its devoted supporters to-day among the socialist workers just as much as among the bourgeois classes. But there is also a real danger that by sheer reaction to the foreign domination there should arise an unbridled nationalism which subordinates everything to the national interest and the national ideology, and which meets National-Socialism on its own level, that is by national idolatry and hatred of the foreigner.

## OPPORTUNITY AND DANGER

For the Church this situation means both opportunity and temptation. As thoughts go back to the birth of the nation at the time of the Reformation, it is widely realized that the two slogans of the eighty years' war, "For the sake of Religion" and "For the sake of Liberty," still belong together. To-day, as in the sixteenth century, liberty means above all *spiritual* liberty, and the fight for the



nation is above all a fight for the *soul* of the nation. At the same time the stand which the Church has taken has suddenly made it one of the main fortresses of national spiritual resistance. Nowhere except in the Church can one hear clear language concerning the present situation. Thus, as one pastor recently put it, "the wall between the Church and the nation has become transparent." The Church has regained much lost territory. Many who had come to think of the Church as an antiquated institution suddenly find it a central factor in the great national struggle and begin to wonder why the Church stands when so many other bodies fall.

But that is precisely where the temptation comes in. The Church can easily exploit this situation. Those who flock to the Church services because the pastor prays openly for the House of Orange (which most pastors do, though it is forbidden), or as some put it "because it is the only place where one hears real Dutch," may tempt the preacher to score a cheap success by "preaching the Kingdom of the Netherlands instead of the Kingdom of God." One form which this danger takes is the uncritical application of the Old Testament promises concerning the people of Israel to the Dutch people. Another is the unhealthy interest in the singing of psalms directed against the enemies of Israel.

It may, however, be said that the leaders of the Church are very conscious of both the opportunity and the danger. They do not withdraw in pietistic isolation from the national struggle; they emphasize again and again that the nation is a gift of God, that the Dutch nation has special reasons to be thankful for its spiritual heritage, according to which liberty is founded on Christian convictions, and that this heritage must be defended. But they have again and again uttered warnings against national idolatry and against the growing hold of hatred on the hearts of the people. In the confession of sins which appears in the pastoral letter of September, 1941, it is said: "We give way to our natural inclination to foster enmity instead of witnessing simply and faithfully to Christ." Many pastors concentrate in their preaching on the immense difference between hatred of evil and hatred of persons who are misled by that evil.

## THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

But as the Church has to meet these problems of and in the world, it realizes more and

more that it needs above all a transformation and renewal of its own life. As it is forced to speak and act as the Church, it becomes clear that in its own life it has largely ceased to be the Church. The great shock of the new encounter with the world thus becomes the lever by which the Church is lifted out of the stagnant morass of bureaucracy and organizational conservatism.

In the summer of 1940, a special advisory committee to assist the Synod in its important decisions was appointed. This new group, which is composed of younger churchmen (many of them "products" of the Christian youth movements), has become the real centre of life in the Church. It must be said to the great credit of the Synod that it has given this unofficial group all the backing that it could possibly want and thus made it possible that in many respects new beginnings could be made. The activities of this committee are too numerous to be treated in full. They include the relating of the Christian youth movements and of the missionary societies to the Church, the giving of guidance in the realm of preaching, the re-study of the Church's task in the realm of social relief and of the care of the sick, and many other matters. But there is one fundamental task which this committee has undertaken which needs special mention, namely the one of "mobilization of the Christian community" (the building up of the Church and especially of the local parish). This task is by far the heaviest of all which faces the Church.

Nothing less than a spiritual revolution is needed to transform the pastor-centred, largely receptive, often theologically divided and very bourgeois parishes into living centres of community, in which all have their responsible share, which stand shoulder to shoulder in their common resistance against the strong pressure of the anti-Christian ideologies and give a clear common witness to the world. And it is a question whether even the shock of the tragic events of these years can overcome the inertia of the traditions of individualism and self-satisfaction which have reigned for hundreds of years. Moreover, the theological battle which has divided the Church has not ceased, and must indeed be brought to some conclusion before a real renewal of Church life all along the line can take place. But a real beginning has been made. There is a new will to unity which is not merely compromise, but unity in the common confession of the Lordship of Christ. There is a response to the call for active lay-



men as, for instance, in Amsterdam where hundreds of laymen have taken part in a special course lasting many months for Church workers. The evangelistic weeks and Bible weeks which are held in various parts of the country are reaching large numbers.

### THE CONFLICT DEEPENS

During the last year the pressure on the Church, as indeed on the whole spiritual life of the country, has greatly increased. It is no longer pretended that the Dutch genius is to be respected, but declared openly that Holland must come in line with the great German fraternity and swallow National-Socialism. Nazi ideology dominates the press and is gradually introduced into education. The party-organs conduct violent campaigns against the "political pastors," who dare to protect the Jews and to speak out on political issues.

The Christian political parties and trade unions have been dissolved and many of their leaders are imprisoned. The Christian press has practically ceased to exist. Even the official Church organ is forbidden. The Christian youth movements are in danger. There is no general frontal attack upon the Church, for that would solidify public opinion even more and the party does not consider the time ripe for an open fight. But the indirect attack, which consists in limiting the field of action of the Church and in ousting it from public life, is carried on with increasing vigour. A certain number of pastors and a large number of lay-leaders of the Church are in prison or concentration camp because of their Christian witness.

But the Church continues to speak. Indeed its witness has become clearer and richer. In the spring of 1941, the Synod has protested

once more against the violation of law and justice, and against the rule of violence which increasingly characterize the methods of the power of occupation. In September, 1941, the Synod spoke to the Church itself in a remarkable pastoral letter which is intended to give guidance in relation to the main problems with which Christians in Holland are now confronted. The letter begins with a clear affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. "The idea that His power can be excluded from any realm of life is foolish unbelief. That is why the Church of Christ cannot cease to claim the whole of life, not for itself, but for its Lord." It then contains a most concrete confession of the sins and shortcomings of the Church in all realms, including the social realm. It proceeds to speak of the calling of the Government, which is subject to the King of kings and which must make room for the Church and its members not only to preach the Gospel, but also to *obey* the Gospel. If the Government requires of its subjects to act against God's commandments, the Christian serves the Government best by obedience to God's commandment and by accepting the consequent suffering.

There is once more a Church in Holland. It is by no means a perfect Church. To overcome its moral sickness, its divisions, its bourgeois conservatism will be a long up-hill struggle. But it is a Church on the way towards being the *ecclesia militans*. What most of us in our unbelief had considered impossible has happened. God has sent His breath on the dry bones and we have once more a Mother Church which gives us guidance and consolation, and which holds up our hands in the struggle which is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of the darkness of this world.

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